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OPINION AND COMMENTARY

Spies here and elsewhere

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Spies, old style, are having their troubles. Just the other day Canada decided the time had come to close out a Soviet spy nest in Ottawa. Eleven were sent packing and two more who were away were told not to come back.

A few years back (1971) the British did a massive house cleaning job also on Russian spies. They sent 90 home from London and banned 15 more who were elsewhere at the time.

One reason for that British housecleaning was the blatancy, and the sheer numbers, of the Soviet spy operation in London. Many of them didn't even pretend not to be spies. The Soviet spy system had become so arrogant that the Russians proposed sending back to London one of their agents who had previously been arrested for trying to bribe a British businessman.

There has been much controversy of late in Washington about a different side of the same coin, the efforts of the new Director of Central Intelligence, Admiral Stansfield Turner, to modernize the American spy service — the clandestine side of the Central Intelligence Agency. Admiral Turner has been criticized

(a) for firing anyone (a horrifying deed to the bureaucracy of Washington) and (b) for notifying those who were being dropped by a brief letter of intention. This was called unsuitable treatment for men who had allegedly risked their lives in the service.

The truth of the matter is that Admiral Turner should probably be criticized for not trimming down the American spy service by a lot more than he is.

Like the Soviet spy service the American grew like Topsy during the "cold war" — particularly during its final Vietnam phase. It mushroomed. And as it mushroomed it grew careless. Ask any American ambassador and you will get horror stories of the extravagant and willful behavior in recent years of the people on the clandestine side of CIA.

But the Vietnam war is over. And this is a new and different world. There is ample use in this new world for good, efficient clandestine operations and operators. But the kind of work done during the Vietnam war is not likely to occur again for a long time, if ever. The tasks are different, the tools different, the techniques different.

The techniques used by the Soviet spy net in Canada read like a poor imitation of an early James Bond thriller. That sort of thing belongs to ancient history now. The Soviet KGB service is so powerful in Moscow that probably no one dares to try to purge or modernize it. Americans can be thankful that it is still possible in Washington for someone to shake up an old spy system that needs to be brought in step with modern times.

In rough figures the American spy service reached a total of about 6,000 officers at the peak of the Vietnam war. Admiral Turner's predecessors trimmed it down to about 5,000. His goal is to bring it down by another thousand and then level it off at about 4,000. His quota of reductions for the current year is 212. Of these 167 had reached retirement age or have been placed elsewhere in CIA or in government service. He has actually fired 45 persons out of the total of about 5,000 whom he inherited.

Considering the "mistakes" committed by the clandestine side of CIA during the Watergate affair this seems a small number.

One of those worst mistakes was having a lot of bunglers on the payroll. That original Watergate burglary was largely done with CIA people and techniques. It was about as badly bungled as any burglary could well be. In the process of uncovering the Watergate story a lot of the old American spy apparatus was uncovered. In James Bond language, its "cover" was "blown." And we all know what an efficient spy system does with any person or group whose cover is blown. They are scrapped or abandoned.

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